ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: The Impact of Task Difficulty on Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) Processes in Gifted Students

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PAGES: 138

Gifted students need to experience challenge to develop motivation, persistence, and strategies needed to successfully confront future challenging educational experiences. Challenge is often assumed at a broad level, ignoring the students' individual perceptions. Further, little is known about how gifted students' perceptions of task difficulty impact the self-regulated learning (SRL) processes that they engage to complete the task and that broadly impact whether they achieve or underachieve.

This study employed a within-subjects design administered in two stages. In Stage 1, Honors College students completed data analysis problems of varying difficulty levels. After each problem, students rated the difficulty level. Difficulty rating, time spent on each problem, and problem outcome were used to individually select easy and difficult problems. In Stage 2, 45 Honors College students completed SRL microanalysis interviews that measured their SRL processes for the individually selected easy and difficult tasks.

Results demonstrated that task difficulty impacts some SRL processes. Task difficulty significantly impacts self-efficacy, quality of strategies used, effort, and self-evaluation. Students expressed low interest for both problems and did not distinguish strategic plans based on the

difficulty level of the task. Further, gifted students had lower confidence, lower self-evaluations, and higher effort on difficult problems. However, gifted students frequently approached difficult tasks with low-level strategies.

Individual perceptions of difficulty are important to ensure that gifted learners experience challenge. To meet their full potential, gifted learners need to experience challenge partnered with support in developing strategic approaches and in transferring strategies between tasks of different difficulty levels.